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ABSTRACT

The predominant emphasis in American education upon the cognate realm, to the virtual exclusion of affective learning, is discussed in the context of the middle school movement. Nine characteristics of the middle school program that more nearly create a balance between the cognitive and affective elements in learning are cited and translated into design elements of middle school facilities. Specific recommendations are provided in the areas of instructional technology, media centers, personalized learning territories, space flexibility, large group instruction, and guidance services. A related document is EA 003 234. (Author)

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THE MIDDLE SCHOOL:
AN OPPORTUNITY FOR HUMANIZED EDUCATION

An address delivered to the Northern Michigan University Planning Symposium
Marquette, Michigan
May 8, 1970

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Profound observations are not infrequently the product of unpromising circumstances. A case in point was the experience of President Lowell of Harvard while watching earthworms in the psychology laboratory. Worms were placed at one end of a simple maze in the hope they could successfully crawl their way to the other end. Some of the earthworms made an incorrect turn halfway through the maze and these received motivation in the form of an electric shock to improve their performance. On the second try, three-fourths of these recalcitrant learners made the proper turn which would ultimately lead them to successful transit of the maze. President Lowell watched in fascination but reluctantly concluded, "Well, these earthworms have clearly been changed by going to Harvard, but I can't really say they are any better worms for having been here."

Some people are beginning to feel the same way about learners in general, whether they be earthworms or human beings. Students are changed by going to school, but not necessarily for the better. To put it another way, they may learn factual knowledge and intellectual skills but they learn very little about how to become a humane and cooperative member of society. In the America of the 1970's, this failure of the schools is having tragic consequences. Social strife and class warfare, protest and dissent, alienation and impersonalization, bureaucratization and specialization characterize American society today. With society increasingly fragmented and in very real danger of disintegration, the view is growing among some that education must make a radical shift in its traditional emphases in order that society may have better people as well as better technicians. The middle school, in its concept, in the age and developmental range it seeks to serve, and in its relative newness and freedom from hindering tradition, would appear to offer one promising avenue of attack.

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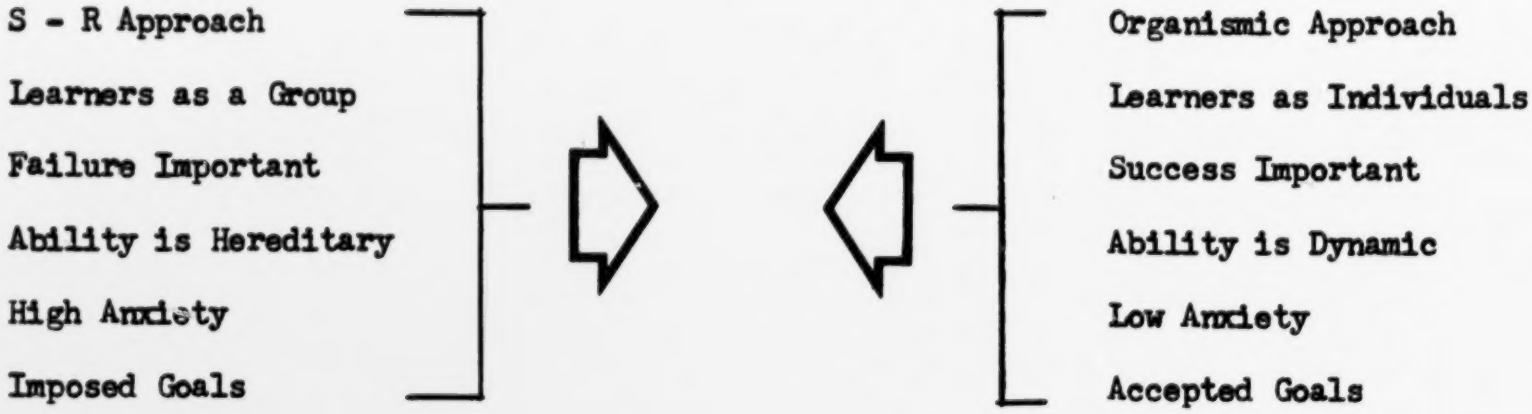
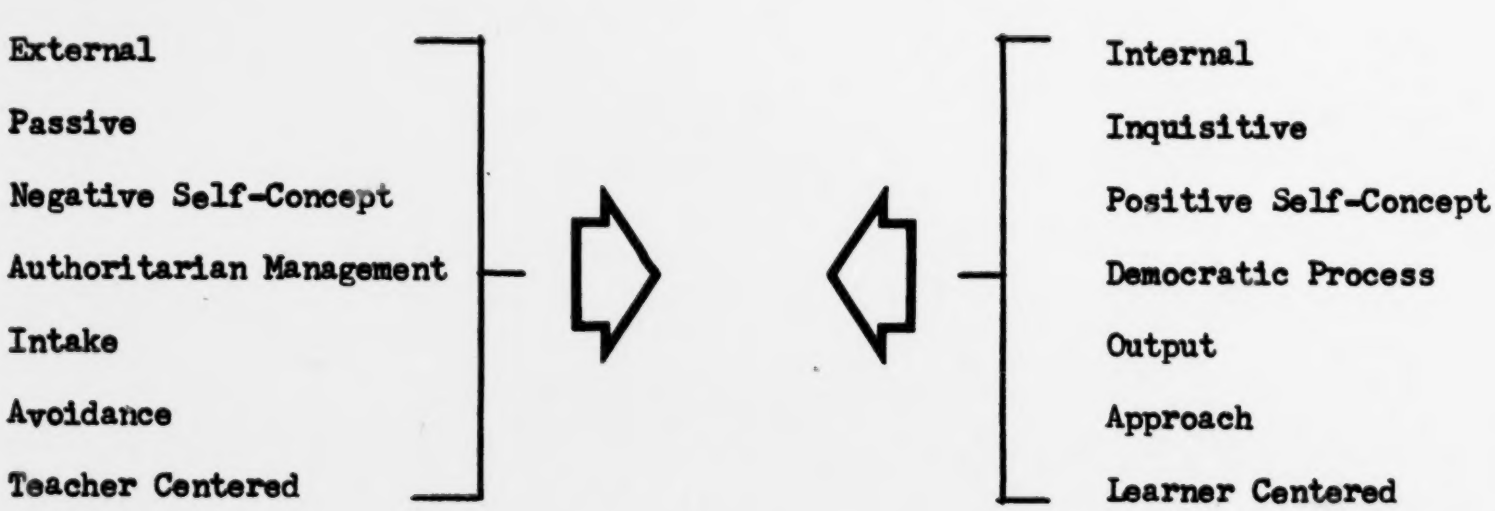
In point of fact, education has never really addressed itself to the task of instilling in each individual a sense of importance, a sense of recognition and appreciation, and a sense of belonging. These are the qualities of humaneness which are notably absent in much of present-day life. From Plato to Dewey and beyond, the overriding goal of education has been to foster intellectual performance and rational thought. And if society needed more engineers or more scientists or more linguists, the educational system could simply tool-up to produce the required numbers of engineers and linguists and scientists. The curriculum came to be that body of knowledge required by the individual to perform given intellectual tasks. The learner must conform to a predetermined curriculum much like the mythological bed of Procrustes. The unfriendly giant would bind the luckless traveler to his bed and either stretch the victim's legs or cut them off in order to get them to fit. In more recent years, the Procrustean bed has been modified somewhat through the concept of individualization. This meant essentially that the individual learner was still expected to meet group norms but could do so at his own pace with specialized materials and unique experiences. The Procrustean bed was still in use but the individual learner had now been given time to grow (or shrink!) in order to conform to the Procrustean curriculum.

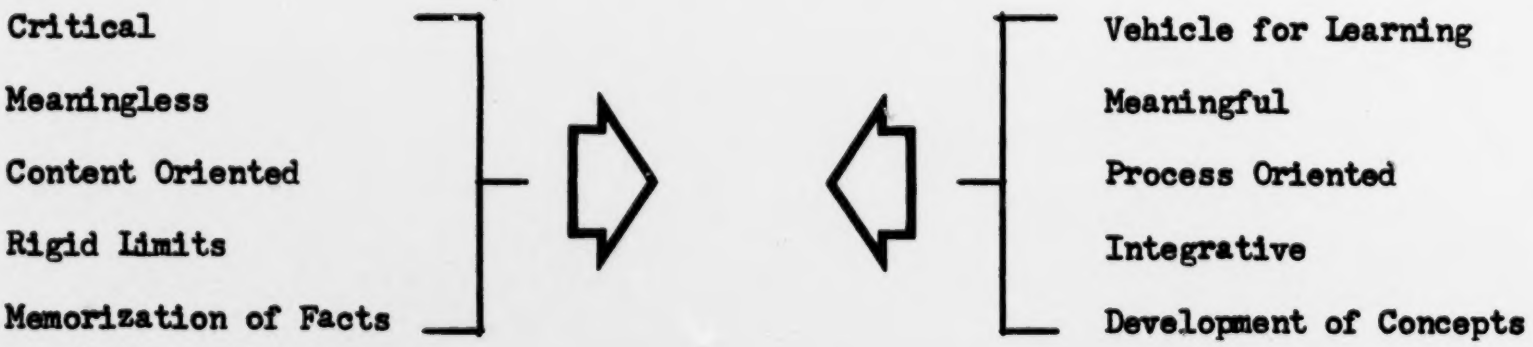
This long-standing emphasis upon intellectual performance to the virtual exclusion of human development remained more than adequate as long as the basic family grouping, the village or small town, the trade or occupation or role, and the essentially rural setting provided that cohesion and sense of belonging necessary for a viable society. But society has changed and the old solutions no longer work. The breakdown of the family unit, the decline of religion's moral suasion, and the growth of the impersonal megalopolis are some of the forces which have left many individuals rootless and adrift, not knowing and not caring about their fellow man, and seeking self-aggrandizement above all else. A society which persists in the neglect of humane development of its youth does so at its own risk.

An examination of the curricular continuums along which most current school programs function is instructive in terms of the essentially restrictive and academic nature of instruction. If we look at bi-polar characteristics representing the extreme positions in the conceptualization of the learning process, or the nature of motivation, or the role of subject matter, it becomes apparent that most school programs still tend to reside toward those pole positions which, if they are not antithetical, are largely unproductive of the goal of developing young people with the values needed for a rich life and a healthy society.

CURRICULAR CHARACTERISTICS







These educational programs may be effective but they are almost certainly not efficient. Effectiveness can be defined as the degree to which the goals of the school are achieved in practice. Efficiency refers to the degree to which the curriculum of the school provides psychic satisfaction to the learner.

Clearly, most schools whose sole curricular goal is the encouragement of cognate learning would receive relatively good marks for effectiveness. The economic development of the United States and its imposing stature in the pure and applied sciences are indisputable testimony to the general effectiveness of education in these areas. Just as clearly, most school programs must rank far lower on the scale of efficiency if student drop-out rates, the protestations of learners, and the conditions in our own society are any evidence. For a distinct minority of students in every school, effectiveness and efficiency are congruent. These are learners for whom the goals of the school are, or come to be, their own personal goals. But for all learners, education should strive to bring high levels both of effectiveness and efficiency to students, to provide curricula which meet the personal needs of students as well as prepare them for useful and socially productive lives. The humane qualities of concern for others, self-respect, self-confidence, cooperation, and rationality cannot come through a curriculum imposed upon others. It comes through a curriculum developed in part by the student, a curriculum which is sufficiently flexible to provide experiences relevant to each learner.

Impractical and hopelessly idealistic? Not if we will recognize the consequences to our society if we fail to humanize the education of young people and if we are willing to discard many of the goals we have long held for education long after they had outlived their practicality. Practicality is largely what we want to make it. And Disraeli said "a practical man is the one who repeats the errors of his forefathers."

How do we operationalize this proposal? The middle school may be a good place to begin for it is the middle school which has recognized the very special needs of young people between the ages of 10 and 14 years, it is the middle school which has emphasized the importance of wide exploratory activities as these young people try to understand themselves and others, it is the middle school which encourages a warm and supportive environment for learners who are no longer children and not yet adults, and it is the middle school which has thus far escaped the rigid and stereotyped curriculum which characterizes so much of education. In short, the middle school would seem to offer the opportunity to humanize the learning experiences of young people at a stage in their physical and social development where feelings and beliefs and understandings and relationships are critical.

What might the characteristics be of such a middle school curriculum? First, the learning program might need to be pluralistic, recognizing that the starting point of all education must be the personal needs of the student. It makes little sense to match students against group norms which are themselves meaningless. And it does no good and much harm to expect each student to achieve at least minimal skill levels when those standards are established without regard to the learner himself.

Second, the curriculum might wisely avoid emphasizing the "what to learn" in preference to learning "how" to learn. There is no conceivable way today to anticipate those specific knowledges and skills which will be demanded by a society twenty years in the future.

Third, the program of the middle school would most probably include limited instruction in what could be termed the learning skills, the abilities to read, write, perform arithmetic computation, utilize information retrieval technology, and express oneself verbally.

Fourth, the curriculum would likely provide wide opportunities for exploration. The learner might have some formal but many more informal opportunities to learn about many new aspects of his world, to develop interests and understandings, to pursue the personal concerns and meet the personal needs of the individual.

Fifth, the school might benefit from a very minimum of bureaucratic management. Students might determine largely for themselves the amount of time spent in each activity and class schedules should be flexibly arranged to maximize learning efficiency and effectiveness.

Sixth, the institutional demands made upon the learner would be consistent with the personalized purposes of the school. Students should be as free as possible to come and go, to study or not study, to take this course or that course. It was the superintendent of schools in Rockford, Illinois, who said in May 1969 that

> our schools are organized on a semi-prison approach. We have lack of trust, sign-in and sign-out slips, detention systems, wardens and jailers, fear of escape, regimentation, limited opportunities for choice, barricaded or locked toilet rooms, cell-like classrooms.[1]

[1]Cited from Helen B. Shaffer, Discipline in Public Schools Washington, D.C., Editorial Research Reports, 1969, p. 652.

Seventh, the curriculum would likely emphasize the development of healthy relationships between people, encouraging the social development of the individual while helping each human being better understand his own needs. George Dennison, in his new book The Lives of Children, has stressed the critical role of social relationships in all learning.

> The public school conceives of itself merely as a place of instruction, and in so doing puts severe restraints on the relationships between persons. This helps create one of the really damaging myths of education, namely, that learning is the result of teaching; that the progress of the child bears a direct relation to methods of instruction and internal relationships of curriculum. Nothing could be farther from the truth . . . . Education is a function of experience and a fact of life, not the activity of a closed system of schools. Thus, while the school itself becomes manipulative, . . . there is need to cease thinking of the school as a place and learn to believe that it is basically relationships.[2]

Eighth, learner achievement would most probably be evaluated in ways which avoided comparing one student to another. John Holt, the author of How Children Fail, notes that we manage to destroy children's enthusiasm for learning

> . . . by encouraging and compelling them to work for petty and contemptible rewards -- gold stars, or papers marked 100 and tacked to the wall, or report cards, or honor rolls, or dean's lists, or Phi Beta Kappa keys -- in short, for the ignoble satisfaction of feeling that they are better than someone else.[3]

Ninth, the curriculum would likely discourage any emphasis upon working independently. With social cooperation a major goal of this kind of education, independent study to the exclusion of social development would be antithetical.

How would these curricular characteristics of the middle school translate into a physical environment for learning? As should be obvious by now, the program here described for the middle school is not another junior-high-school curriculum. It is a school program designed to achieve a personalized instructional pattern eventuating in a member of society in the true sense of the phrase, an individual who understands himself, his role in life, his responsibilities to others in society, and capable of on-going

[2]Cited from Phi Delta Kappan 51:393 (March, 1970).
[3]John Holt, "How Children Fail -- Education and Peace". Manas 18:44 (November 3, 1965).

education as his personal needs and those of his community and world change. Other conceptions of the middle school curriculum will doubtless require modifications in physical features of the school facility, but the following characteristics would appear to be needed if the middle school is to serve as a humanizing element in our society.

Perhaps the most fundamental quality of the middle school should be its non-institutional environment. The purposes of the middle school and the fact that some students in the middle school may be in the nine-to-ten-year-old range suggest the advisability of providing warm, inviting, friendly interior design. The creative use of color and texture, the careful placement of features, and the avoidance of excessively large, bleak expanses of space can impart an attractive and non-threatening appearance to learning environments. We should always keep in mind that architecture is the art of producing beautifully what is useful.

Equally as important as the attractiveness of the middle school environment is the need for flexibility in that environment. The changes occurring in educational practice over just one decade have served as strong inducement to plan maximum flexibility into the design of school facilities. While flexibility is a term much in favor today and everyone is very willing to agree that no new school should be without it, there is considerable misunderstanding about the nature and uses of flexibility.

In reality, the term flexibility has at least four meanings for the design of educational facilities. The first kind of flexibility is what might be called "expandability". This refers to the ability to expand a given facility or space at some future time in order to accommodate more users or different functions. Expandability is encountered most commonly in the case of cafeterias or libraries or other special facilities for which increased future need is anticipated. By planning the original space to permit the subsequent removal of walls and the extension of area into an interior courtyard, an exterior adjacent area of the site, or into another room or rooms, some degree of future flexibility is achieved. Obviously, expandability is not a quality in architectural design which permits rapid change to meet week-by-week or hour-by-hour program demands.

The second category of educational facility flexibility can be termed "convertability". This refers to that quality of space which permits it to be converted to other uses by the addition or deletion of equipment. A space might be planned for immediate utilization as a clerical office with future conversion into a data processing center. This would likely involve the original installation of terminal outlets, conduit, and telephone lines although their use is not contemplated for several years. In the continuum of flexibility, convertability generally entails less expense and time in effecting change. Unlike expandability, convertability can usually be achieved without major structural changes to the building. On the other hand, it too is something which will probably not be accomplished in one or two hours.

The third type of flexibility in the design of educational facilities is what can be conveniently termed "versatility". Versatility in space utilization is exemplified where several disparate activities can take place within the same area either simultaneously or in rapid succession. This quality is commonly achieved today either through the use of open-space planning with attendant visual dividers and/or sightline storage cabinetry or through the use of demountable or operable walls. Of these options, the demountable wall provides the least flexibility in terms of time and effort required to effect wall changes. Operable walls represent an evolutionary stage in the move from almost total inflexibility to total flexibility. But operable walls are costly, sometimes difficult to operate, and not infrequently poor deterrents to the transmission of sound. The use of more or less completely open space for a variety of instructional purposes has proven to be most satisfactory and at relatively low cost. Where careful acoustic conditioning takes place, sound has proven to be no impediment to learning. This is not to say that no sound from adjacent groups can be heard but rather that sound becomes a constant background level and loses its distractive quality as it ceases to be distinguishable and understandable. For those teachers who desire visual privacy in the open plan configuration, movable visual screening can be provided and equipped, if desired, with chalkboard, tackboard, magic-marker surface, or projection screen. A variety of specially-designed cabinetry can also prove useful not alone by storing teaching equipment and supplies but by blocking vision between instructional areas and defining class spaces.

The fourth type of flexibility in the design of schools can be termed "electronic flexibility". A school district may wish to plan for instructional television or student response systems while deferring expenditure until program conditions warrant. Or, the district may anticipate that computer assisted instruction will become practical within ten years of construction of their facility. A reasonable level of electronic flexibility can be achieved at very minimal expense by providing in-ceiling tray systems for lay-in cable and wiring together with appropriate wall conduit and junction panels.

If there are actually several kinds of flexibility in school design, it is also true that flexibility is not an unmixed blessing. "Expandability" offers a degree of long-term flexibility by permitting the expansion of given facilities into adjacent areas, but it does so at the expense of considerable construction and delay. "Convertability" allows space to be designed for two or more successive functions -- a classroom which can be converted into a science lab or a store room which becomes another kitchen. But in attempting to design for what are often two quite different functions, the planner of convertable space must compromise the functionality of design for any one use of that space.

"Versatility" in the use of space to achieve flexibility offers the greatest promise of meeting the ever-changing demands of education. Particularly flexible is the open-plan instructional area which allows the instructional staff and the learners to define and re-define areas of function. It permits areas to accommodate rapidly shifting instructional tasks with a very minimum of physical change. For those teachers who feel the need for visual privacy, visual barriers which are movable and functional in their own right as storage cabinets, chalkboards, tackboards, or projection surfaces can provide almost instant enclosure around desired group activities. But this approach to structural flexibility has its disadvantages also. It requires that the instructional activities taking place in the open-plan arena be of generally similar nature. That is, a social studies class and an industrial arts shop would probably not be compatible but that same industrial arts shop and an art workroom might provide very real opportunities for sharing of instruction and facilities.

Another problem in the planning of open-space flexibility is that of handling electrical and electronic service to spaces where walls do not exist and support columns are not convenient to carrel or other functional locations. This is generally resolved through overhead supply with attractive floor-to-ceiling poles or stanchions to conduct electrical or electronic service to needed locations, or through use of floor outlets. Electronic carpet, now under research development, holds the promise of permitting electrical equipment to be plugged directly into the floor covering at any point desired to provide line voltage for the operation of phonographs, overhead projectors, or similar portable instructional equipment and to provide video and audio signals for instructional television, listening stations, or computer assisted instruction.

Still another problem in the use of truly versatile instructional space is that of sound. The issue, however, is frequently not, as one might think, the problem of being heard too well but of not being heard well enough. Acoustic treatments available today and the careful design of open instructional areas from a sound dispersion standpoint can really create an environment in which those teachers with weak voices experience difficulty in being heard. In such cases, the use of small portable voice amplification units or low volume ceiling speaker systems may be advisable.

But when all is said, the advantages of space flexibility far outweigh any disadvantage in their use. The middle school, being as it is a new and still developing concept, requires a learning environment which is not locked-in for all time, which can permit minute-to-minute as well as year-to-year changes in the instructional program. And if the personal needs of the middle school learner are to be uppermost in that program, if, as two authorities on the middle school have said, "the primary emphasis in the middle school program should be upon the total personalization of purposes and standards for the pupils in such a program",[4] then the physical environment in which learning takes place must be free to change as the needs of learners change.

[4]Thomas E. Curtis and Wilma W. Bidwell, "Rationale for Instruction in the Middle School". Educational Leadership 27:578 (March, 1970).

Yet another desirable feature of the personalized and humanized middle school is areas for small group work and discussion. Such facilities are essential if the program of the middle school is to encourage in students an ability to work with others, to understand the feelings and needs of others, and to develop the self-insight which comes from interacting with others. Two kinds of small group areas seem particularly suggestive for the middle school: (1) totally enclosed discussion or seminar rooms ranging from 100 to 300 square feet in area and (2) what we have termed "independent learning territories" where a number of learners may be more or less permanently allocated a territory which contains their coat lockers, their work desks, their tackboards and chalkboards, their storage drawers and cabinets for projects and materials, and their discussion table. In the latter type of space, a number of group spaces could comprise a larger unit supervised by one or more members of the instructional team with visual control of all group areas through the use of low portable space dividers. The concept of cooperative group activity is not new but the explicit provision of environments which encourage such activity is not so usual. What many planners fail to realize is that, while the open plan permits the multiple use of generalized space, it is not a substitute for places where students can yell at each other (a lot of healthy learning takes place by yelling!) or where students can make a recording in a quiet environment or where students can work on a project and leave it set up. Furthermore, the independent learning territory approach makes every student the possessor of his own "territory" and there is growing suspicion that most living creatures have an in-built sense of territoriality, a predisposition to identify one area or one spot or one corner as his own. Here he can keep his materials, personalize his tackboard, carry on a group discussion with others, or develop a project.

Inversely, large-group instructional facilities are not, I think, a desirable feature in the middle school as I have described it. I seriously question the wisdom of providing auditoria, lecture rooms, or similar large-group instructional features. The aim of the middle school is to meet the needs of the individual and these can rarely, perhaps never, be met by treating him as if he were identical in interest and ability to scores of other learners. The age levels of middle school students and their comparative unfamiliarity to what is really a collegiate model of education suggest the inappropriateness of relying upon large-group instruction and of planning such facilities into the middle school. On those occasions when this kind of grouping <u>might</u> be advisable, the open-plan instructional space can easily be used for this purpose. It does not require special and expensive provision in the middle school.

An element which should be part of the middle school facility is provision for wide exploratory activity in such areas as art, crafts, woodworking, metalworking, plastics, science, physical activities, music, and home economics. Specially equipped learning spaces for each of these endeavours are needed but the way in which they are grouped and located within the total middle school facility can influence their effectiveness. Rather than treat each discipline as a separate and distinct entity with no meaningful relationship to other areas of study, the middle school might better cluster

those activities which could share facilities while at the same time giving the learner insight into the totality and unity of knowledge. For example, we might group home economics and art and industrial arts together in order that these programs could support team teaching or at the very least the sharing of equipment and facilities when needed. The caution I would raise in planning those middle school instructional areas requiring specialized equipment is to avoid the creation of another high school facility. The purpose of the industrial arts in the middle school curriculum is primarily exploratory. It is not vocational and to call it even "prevocational" conjures visions of sixth-graders setting forth to become plumbers and electricians. It is almost always the case that those staff members who are given responsibility for planning the middle school are really junior high school teachers, and the junior high schools have long emulated the senior high schools. Middle school facilities for science or art or the industrial arts would seem best kept as simple as possible. The emphasis might better be upon breadth rather than depth. The idea is to <u>introduce</u> young people to their world rather than smother them in it.

A feature common to middle schools thus far is the relatively large instructional media center. It has become something of a cliche in educational facility design. In many cases, the instructional media center does not reflect the general purposes of the middle school program. If we personalize and humanize the program of the school in the middle, what does this tell us about the location of learning resources and the scope of the learning services available to students? It may mean, for instance, that a library or learning center in the usual sense is not required. If the design of the school incorporates the independent learning territory concept which I described earlier, what may be needed are the books and the tapes and the filmstrips and the tape recorders and the projectors, all located in a dissemination center where learners could browse, accessible to students who take them back to their own "territory" for study. In this case, the area devoted to the library functions of the school could be much less than in more conventional approaches. On the other hand, personalization and humanization of program imply that learners can avail themselves of individual assistance not alone in finding a book but in understanding what it says. That is why at least one middle school learning center will feature subject-assistance personnel on-station in the center to help a student who is experiencing difficulty in math or social studies or English.

A personalized and humanized curriculum also suggests the need for close integration between the processes of learning about the world and learning about oneself. Guidance and counseling services might profitably be located <u>within</u> the learning center, removing somewhat the stigma of needing to see a counselor while bringing counselors and students into closer contact. If the middle school curriculum is based on the belief that social learning and cognate learning go hand-in-hand, perhaps the learning center should provide places where students can study in groups, develop group presentations, or plan activities.

An element all too neglected in the planning of middle schools is the building site itself. Learning can take place outside four walls and careful development of the site can provide a rich environment for student learning. Ponds, creeks, and wooded areas can become outdoor learning laboratories for science, art, social studies, home economics -- in fact, any learning area. Skating rinks, ski slopes, golf driving ranges, putting greens, and toboggan slides can supplement the more usual outdoor athletic features. The "problem" site sometimes ceases to be so considered when the true potential for outdoor education is realized.

Then, there are many other elements which would appear desirable if the goals of the middle school are to be translated faithfully into a physical learning environment. We might consider the value of some works of art in the middle school. Most schools are drearily unattractive places we would stay out of by choice. It is little wonder that most students have identical reactions. A sculpture or mobile may serve to make the middle school be perceived by its clients as a place where beauty and fun can co-exist with learning. Learning to appreciate beauty is an important kind of learning if there is more to life than mere survival.

We might think about providing a student commons in the middle school so that learners would have some options in their use of school time. A student-operated television or radio station in the school could be a real learning opportunity for young people, and the cost would be minimal, especially if closed-circuit television were provided as part of the instructional program. The school's intercommunication system could be specified to provide background music to students during dining periods and at other desired times. In these and countless other ways, the middle school can be planned as a learning environment which encourages a personalized education and the development of better people.

Here then is the challenge. In planning our schools, we should ask ourselves not the question "What will tomorrow look like?" but instead "What do we need to do today to make tomorrow better?" It is the difference between planning <u>for</u> the future and <u>planning</u> the future. We can see in our society of the 1970's the things which we do not want to accommodate -- the distrust, the hatred, the alienation. We can see in much of contemporary education the purposes and practices which we do not want to perpetuate -- the establishment of artificial and meaningless goals for young people, the attempt to base what is learned upon society's presumed needs, the predominance of cognate learning to the virtual exclusion of the affective realm of feelings and human understandings. The middle school concept offers one promising direction in trying to build a better society, a society of good people. The problems confronting the United States today are people problems. They are problems caused by people and they must be resolved by people.

People are also the key to making the middle school work as I have described it. Of course, new school facilities alone will not bring success, but, when teamed with a school staff which is able, experienced, and supportive of the middle school idea, those facilities help the process of learning instead of hindering it. Then perhaps we can say that, unlike the earthworms at Harvard, our students are not only changed by going to school but are changed for the better.

As I said at the outset of these remarks, many of these pitfalls have equal validity not merely in the planning of the middle school but in planning any educational facility. But the newness of the middle school does pose some special planning problems: (1) unfamiliarity with or misunderstanding of the rationale behind the school in the middle; (2) the "bandwagon syndrome" faced when any new development in education achieves public attention; (3) the training of school staff who are intellectually and emotionally equipped to make the middle-school concept work; (4) the willingness of board and administration to accept program experimentation and ongoing program evolution; (5) the dangers of promising too much too soon in an organizational context which is extremely promising but largely untried.

Perhaps by keeping in mind the wisdom of two of America's leading philosophers can we avoid the more serious pitfalls in planning the middle school. That noted denizen of the Okefenokee Swamp, Pogo, likes to say that "We has met the enemy and he is us". And when Charlie Brown of Peanuts fame informed his perennial antagonist Lucy that those who get the most out of life are those who try to accomplish something, Lucy was incredulous. "Accomplish something?" she cried, "I thought we were just supposed to keep busy". We are fast approaching a time when our publics will expect accountability from their educational systems. Keeping busy, then, will not be sufficient.